

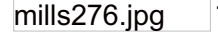


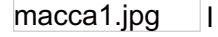
Public paparazzi: the citizen photographer


 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/02/16/public-paparazzi-the-citizen-photographer/

2008-2-16

 This blog is part of this month's "[Carnival of Journalism](#)", a network of bloggers writing about journalism. This month's thoughtful and useful [articles](#) by experts in the US and UK talk about how professional and citizen journalists can use [Twitter](#), social [bookmarking](#), and [mobiles](#) to improve national and [local reporting](#) and even to take on the [Scientologists](#). Here's my contribution:

 The paparazzi are circling outside my windows. They are dressed like Special Forces with fatigues and black woolen hats. Of course, it's not me they want to snap, it's Sir Paul [McCartney](#) or Heather [Mills](#). My offices overlook the [High Court](#) in London where the "former Beatle" and "former model" are battling over custody of the millions in their former joint bank account. The hearings are in camera but they are certainly not on camera. So the snappers are dodging down the medieval alleys that surround the Gothic court buildings to find a viewpoint in through the windows of the legal offices. Their massive high-powered lenses are pointed at doors and through curtains in the hope that they can snatch and record a glimpse of the warring divorcees. This is about as brutally physical as 'Old Media' can get but one can't help admiring the persistence and optimism of the photographers. It's also a curious throw-back to an age before citizen journalism began transforming news imagery.

 I am part of a research [project](#) to chart the impact of photographic "user generated content" upon mainstream media. I have no doubt that it is transforming the craft. Photojournalists used to be both an elite and the dogsbodies of news. They would accompany me to record the handing-over of a charity cheque at the community centre when I was a local paper hack. Then when I went in to TV news they were an elite breed, better paid than most journalists and certainly a lot more skilled in producing and editing as well as filming than I ever was, despite my "BBC Director's Course". A properly-lit, carefully-framed, professionally-produced image or video by a skilled camera-person was the foundation of quality journalism. No more. And it may be a good thing.

 Now any event produces a torrent of free imagery from the public. When Britain floods, or Camden Market burns down, when terrorists crash a car into an airport or when soldiers torture prisoners, the citizen photographer is there. They have a mobile phone camera, or a handy pocket digital that probably has the same quality lens as a decent SLR camera from five years ago. Both phone or camera can record video. You can email it to a news organisation or simply upload it to [YouTube](#), [Flickr](#) or your own blog. You can share it with the press of a button. Their images may be as sharp as a professional's.

However, quality is not the point. Much of the imagery is blurry, it wobbles and it cuts off people's heads. But it is immediate and it is there where the action was – as it happened. It is guileless and authentic. It is unpretentious and unmediated. "But can you trust it?" cries the editor. Verification is not so difficult. It is like any eye-witness account and should be treated with caution. But then so should the product of the paparazzi currently freezing their buns off outside the High Court.

This is what the BBC's [Vicky Taylor](#) says about how their 'user generated hub' is adding to their journalism:

You may have reservations but people are sending pictures from their camera phone in their thousands. Twenty thousand emails on 7/7, about 300 emails with multiple pictures. Buncefield oil depot – 5,000 emails with pictures, and people tend to download multiple images. In terms of irresponsible journalism, I think the opposite is true, it enhances the journalism. Look at 7/7 – pictures described exactly what happened, that is enhancement, not irresponsible.

It does mean that all those photo-journalism students pouring out of J-schools are going to struggle to find paid

work. It means that news organisations are going to have to sort out systems for attracting and sorting the flow of images. BBC and Google Maps did this brilliantly with their interactive [flood map](#) featuring video and stills gathered from the public across the inundated region.

But it may mean that the actual aesthetics of news photography will change as the public starts to privilege 'amateur' imagery over the professional. To be believable photos will have to be more like *YouTube* and less like [Frank Capa](#) or [Don McCullin](#). In other words, more real less reel. Actuality will finally triumph over art.

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